The Mystery of The Yellow Room

By GASTON LEROUX

Stand aside, Messrs. Sherlock Holmes, Martin Hewitt, Dupin, Lecoq, Vidocq, and all the crew of famous detectives of fiction and history! Enter Joseph Rouletabille, reporter-detective, superior to you all in the faculties of observing everything, remembering everything, deducing all the facts that throw light on his cases. Before Rouletabille [pronounced Rule-ta-bee] solved the Mystery of the Yellow Room he was known to the Paris police as a marvel of reasoning power, although he was only a boy in years. With the solution of the famous Stangerson enigma he became a national figure in the literature of France. As such we introduce him to our readers.

CHAPTER I.

In Which We Begin Not to Understand.

"THE yellow room!" Who now remembers this affair which caused so much ink to flow? On the 25th of October, 1892, the following note appeared in the latest edition of the Temps:

"A frightful crime has been committed at the Chateau du Glandier, on the border of the forest of Sainte Genevieve, above Epinay-sur-Orge, at the house of Professor Stangerson. In the night, while the master was working in his laboratory, an attempt was made to assassinate Mlle. Stangerson, who was sleeping in 'the yellow room,' a chamber adjoining this laboratory. The doctors do not answer for the life of Mlle. Stangerson."

The impression made on Paris by this news may be easily imagined. Already at that time the learned world was deeply interested in the labors of Professor Stangerson and his daughter. These labors—the first that were attempted in radiography—served to open the way for M. and Mme. Curie to the discovery of radium. It was expected the professor would shortly read to the Academy of Sciences a sensational paper on his new theory, the dissocintion of matter, a theory destined to overthrow from its base the whole of official science, which based itself on the principle of the conservation of energy.

On the following day the newspapers were full of the tragedy. The Matin published the following article, entitled "A Supernatural Crime."

"These are the only details," wrote the anonymous writer in the Matin, "we have been able to obtain concerning the crime of the Chateau du Glandier. The state of despair in which Professor Stangerson is plunged and the impossibility of getting any information from the lips of the victim have rendered our investigations and those of justice so difficult that at present we cannot form the least idea of what has passed in 'the yellow room' in which Mlle. Stangerson, in her night dress, was found lying on the floor in the agonies of death. We have at least been able to interview Daddy Jacques, as he is called in the country, an old servant in the Stangerson family. Daddy Jacques entered 'the yellow room' at the same time as the professor. This chamber adjoins the laboratory. Laboratory and yellow room are in a pavilion at the end of the park, about a thousand feet from the chateau.

"'It was half past 12 at night,' this honest old man told us, 'and I was in the laboratory, where M. Stangerson was still working, when the thing happened. I had been cleaning and putting instruments in order all the evening and was waiting for M. Stangerson to go to bed. Mlle. Stangerson had worked with her father up to midnight. When the twelve strokes of midnight had been sounded by the cuckoo clock in the laboratory she rose, kissed M. Stangerson and bade him good night. To me she said "Good night, Daddy Jacques," as she passed into the yellow room. We heard her lock the door and shoot the bolt, so that I could not help laughing and said to monsieur: There's mademoiselle double locking herself in. She must be afraid of "the Bete du Bon Dieu."

"'Monsieur did not even hear me, he was so deeply absorbed in what he was doing. Just then we heard the distant miawing of a cat. "Is that going to keep us awake all night?" I said to myself, for I must tell you, monsieur, that, to the end of October, [illegible] in an attic of the pavilion over [illegible]oom, so that mademoiselle [illegible] alone through the [illegible]ark. It was the [illegible] to spend the [illegible]. No doubt [illegible]han the [illegible] had [illegible]o

[illegible]ion then—M. Stangerson and I. We made no noise. He was seated at his desk. As for me, I was sitting on a chair, having finished my work and, looking at him, I said to myself: "What a man! What intelligence! What knowledge!" I attach importance to the fact that we made no noise; for, because of that, the assassin certainly thought that we had left the place. And, suddenly, while the cuckoo was sounding the half after midnight, a desperate clamor broke out in the yellow room. It was the voice of mademoiselle, crying "Murder—murder—help!" Immediately afterward revolver shots rang out, and there was a great noise of tables and furniture being thrown to the ground, as if in the course of a struggle, and again the voice of mademoiselle calling, "Murder—help—papa—papa!"—

"'You may be sure that we quickly sprang up and that M. Stangerson and I threw ourselves upon the door. But, alas, it was locked, fast locked, on the inside by the care of mademoiselle, as I have told you, with key and bolt. We tried to force it open, but it remained firm. M. Stangerson was like a madman, and, truly, it was enough to make him one, for we heard mademoiselle still calling "Help, help!" M. Stangerson showered terrible blows on the door and wept with rage and sobbed with despair and helplessness.

"'It was then that I had an inspiration. "The assassin must have entered by the window!" I cried. "I will go to the window!" and I rushed from the pavilion and ran like one out of his mind.

"'The inspiration was that the window of the yellow room looks out in such a way that the park wall, which abuts on the pavilion, prevented my at once reaching the window. To get up to it one has first to go out of the park. I ran toward the gate and on my way met Bernier and his wife, the gate keepers, who had been attracted by the pistol reports and by our cries. In a few words I told them what had happened and directed the concierge to join M. Stangerson with all speed, while his wife came with me to open the park gate. Five minutes later she and I were before the window of the yellow room.

"'The moon was shining brightly, and I saw clearly that no one had touched the window. Not only were the bars that protect it intact, but the blinds inside of them were drawn, as I had myself drawn them early in the evening, as I did every day, though mademoiselle, knowing that I was tired from the heavy work I had been doing, had begged me not to trouble myself, but leave her to do it, and they were just as I had left them, fastened with an iron catch on the inside. The assassin, therefore, could not have passed either in or out that way, but neither could I get in.

"'It was unfortunate—enough to turn one's brain! The door of the room locked on the inside and the blinds on the only window also fastened on the inside, and mademoiselle still calling for help! No, she had ceased to call! She was dead perhaps. But I still heard her father, in the pavilion, trying to break down the door.

"'With the concierge I hurried back to the pavilion. The door, in spite of the furious attempts of M. Stangerson and Bernier to burst it open, was still holding firm, but at length it gave way before our united efforts, and then what a sight met our eyes! I should tell you that, behind us, the concierge held the laboratory lamp—a powerful lamp that lit the whole chamber.

"'I must also tell you, monsieur, that the yellow room is a very small room. Mademoiselle had furnished it with a fairly large iron bedstead, a small table, a dressing table and two chairs. By the light of the big lamp we saw all at a glance. Mademoiselle, in her nightdress, was lying on the floor in the midst of the greatest disorder. Tables and chairs had been overthrown, showing that there had been a violent struggle. Mademoiselle had certainly been dragged from her bed. She was covered with blood and had terrible marks of finger nails on her throat, the flesh of her neck having been almost torn by the nails. From a wound on the right temple a stream of blood had run down and made a little pool on the floor. When M. Stangerson saw his daughter in that state he threw himself on his knees beside her, uttering a cry of despair. He ascertained that she still breathed.

"'But how to explain that he was not there, that he had already escaped? It passes all imagination. Nobody under the bed, nobody behind the furniture! All that we discovered were traces, blood stained marks of a man's large hand on the walls and on the door, a big handkerchief red with blood without any initials, an old cap and many fresh footmarks of a man on the floor—footmarks of a man with large feet whose boot soles had left a sort of sooty impression. How had [illegible] man got away? How had he van[illegible]? Don't forget, monsieur, that [illegible] no chimney in the yellow [illegible] could not have escaped by the door, which is narrow and on the threshold of which the concierge stood with the lamp while her husband and I searched for him in every corner of the little room, where it is impossible for any one to hide himself. The door, which had been forced open against the wall, could not conceal anything behind it, as we assured ourselves. By the window, still in every way secured, no flight had been possible. What then?

"'But we discovered my revolver on the floor—yes, my revolver! Oh, that brought me back to the reality! The devil would not have needed to steal my revolver to kill mademoiselle. The man who had been there had first gone up to my attic and taken my revolver from the drawer where I kept it. We then ascertained, by counting the cartridges, that the assassin had fired two shots. Ah, it was fortunate for me that M. Stangerson was in the laboratory when the affair took place and had seen with his own eyes that I was there with him, for otherwise, with this business of my revolver, I don't know where we should have been—I should now be under lock and bar.'"

The editor of the Matin added to this interview the following lines:

"We have, without interrupting him, allowed Daddy Jacques to recount to us roughly all he knows about the crime of the yellow room. We have reproduced it in his own words, only sparing the reader the continual lamentations with which he garnished his narrative. We should have liked to put some further questions to Daddy Jacques, but the inquiry of the examining magistrate, which is being carried on at the chateau, makes it impossible for us to gain admission at the Glandier, and, as to the oak wood, it is guarded by a wide circle of policemen who are jealously watching all traces that can lead to the pavilion and that may perhaps lead to the discovery of the assassin.

"We have also wished to question the concierges, but they are invisible. Finally, we have waited in a roadside inn, not far from the gate of the chateau, for the departure of Monsieur de Marquet, the magistrate of Corbeil. At half past 5 we saw him and his clerk and, before he was able to enter his carriage, had an opportunity to ask him the following question:

"'Can you, Monsieur de Marquet, give us any information as to this affair, without inconvenience to the course of your inquiry?'

"'It is impossible for us to do it,' replied Monsieur de Marquet. 'I can only say that it is the strangest affair I have ever known. The more we think we know something, the further we are from knowing anything!'

"We asked Monsieur de Marquet to be good enough to explain his last words, and this is what he said, the importance of which no one will fail to recognize:

"'If nothing is added to the material facts so far established, I fear that the mystery which surrounds the abominable crime of which Mlle. Stangerson has been the victim will never be brought to light, but it is to be hoped, for the sake of our human reason, that the examination of the walls, and of the ceiling of the yellow room—an examination which I shall tomorrow intrust to the builder who constructed the pavilion four years ago—will afford us the proof that may not discourage us. For the problem is this: We know by what way the assassin gained admission—he entered by the door and hid himself under the bed, awaiting Mlle. Stangerson. But how did he leave? How did he escape? If no trap, no secret door, no hiding place, no opening of any sort is found; if the examination of the walls—even to the demolition of the pavilion—does not reveal any passage practicable—not only for a human being, but for any being whatsoever—if the ceiling shows no cracks, if the floor hides no underground passage, one must really believe in the devil!"

"We wanted to know what Daddy Jacques meant by the cry of 'the Bete du Bon Dieu.' The landlord of the Donjon inn explained to us that it is the particularly sinister cry which is uttered sometimes at night by the cat of an old woman—Mother Angenoux, as she is called in the country. Mother Angenoux is a sort of saint, who lives in a hut in the heart of the forest not far from the grotto of Sainte-Genevieve."

In conclusion and at a late hour the same journal announced that the chief of the Paris police had telegraphed to the famous detective Frederic Larsan, who had been sent to London for an affair of stolen securities, to return immediately to Paris.

CHAPTER II.

In Which Joseph Rouletabille Appears For the First Time.

I FIRST knew Joseph Rouletabille [pronounced Rule-ta-bee] when he was a young reporter. At that time I was a beginner at the bar and often met him in the corridors of examining magistrates when I had gone to get a "permit to communicate" for the prison of Mazas or for Saint-Lazare. He had, as they say, "a good nut." He seemed to have taken his head, round as a bullet, out of a box of marbles, and it is from that, I think, that his comrades of the press, all determined billiard players, had given him that nickname, which was to stick to him and be made illustrious by him. He was always as red as a tomato, now gay as a lark, now grave as a judge. How while still so young—he was only sixteen and a half years old when I saw him for the first time—had he already won his way on the press? That was what everybody who came into contact with him might have asked if they had not known his history. At the time of the affair of the woman cut in pieces in the Rue Oberskampf, another forgotten story, he had taken to one of the editors of the Epoque, a paper then rivaling the Matin for information, the left foot, which was missing from the basket in which the grewsome remains were discovered. For this left foot the police had been vainly searching for a week, and young Rouletabille had found it in a drain where nobody had thought of looking for it. To do that he had dressed himself as an extra sewer man, one of a number engaged by the administration of the city of Paris owing to an overflow of the Seine.

When the editor in chief was in possession of the precious foot and informed as to the train of intelligent deductions the boy had been led to make he was divided between the admiration he felt for such detective cunning in a brain of a lad of sixteen years and delight at being able to exhibit in the "morgue window" of his paper the left foot of the Rue Oberskampf.

The boy faced reporter speedily made many friends, for he was serviceable and gifted with a good humor that enchanted the most severe tempered and disarmed the most zealous of his companions. He began to win a reputation as an unraveler of intricate and obscure affairs which found its way to the office of the chief of police. When a case was worth the trouble and Rouletabille—he had already been given his nickname—had been started on the scent by his editor in chief he often got the better of the most famous detectives.

It was at the Bar cafe that I became intimately acquainted with him. Criminal lawyers and journalists are not enemies; the former need advertisement, the latter information. We chatted together, and I soon warmed toward him—his intelligence was so keen and so original, and he had a quality of thought such as I have never found in any other person.

Nearly two years passed in this way, and the better I knew him the more I learned to love him, for in spite of his careless extravagance I had discovered in him what was, considering his age, an extraordinary seriousness of mind. Accustomed as I was to seeing him gay, and, indeed, often too gay, I would many times find him plunged in the deepest melancholy. I tried then to question him as to the cause of this change of humor, but each time he laughed and made me no answer. One day, having questioned him about his parents, of whom he never spoke, he left me, pretending not to have heard what I said.

While things were in this state between us the famous case of "the yellow room" took place. It was this case which was to rank him as the leading newspaper reporter and to obtain for him the reputation of being the greatest detective in the world.

Rouletabille entered my room on the morning of the 26th of October, 1892. He was looking redder than usual, and his eyes were bulging out of his head, as the phrase is, and altogether he appeared to be in a state of extreme excitement. He waved the Matin with a trembling hand and cried:

"Well, my dear Sainclair, have you read it?"

"The Glandier crime?"

"Yes: 'the yellow room!' What do you think of it?"

"I think that it must have been the devil or 'the Bete du Bon Dieu' that committed the crime."

"Be serious!"

"Well, I don't much believe in murderers who make their escape through walls of solid brick. I think Daddy Jacques did wrong to leave behind him the weapon with which the crime was committed, and, as he occupied the attic immediately above Mlle. Stangerson's room, the builder's job ordered by the examining magistrate will give us the key of the enigma, and it will not be long before we learn by what natural trap or by what secret door the old fellow was able to slip in and out and return immediately to the laboratory to M. Stangerson without his absence being noticed. That, of course, is only an hypothesis."

Rouletabille sat down in an armchair, lit his pipe, which he was never without, smoked for a few minutes in silence—no doubt to calm the excitement which visibly dominated him—and then replied:

"No trap will be found, and the mystery of the yellow room will become more and more mysterious. That's why it interests me. The examining magistrate is right. Nothing stranger than this crime has ever been known."

"Have you any idea of the way by which the murderer escaped?" I asked.

"None," replied Rouletabille, "none, for the present. But I have an idea as to the revolver. The murderer did not use it."

"Good heavens! By whom, then, was it used?"

"Why, by Mlle. Stangerson."

"I don't understand, or, rather, I have never understood," I said.

Rouletabille shrugged his shoulders.

"Is there nothing in this article in the Matin by which you were particularly struck?"

"Nothing. I have found the whole of the story it tells equally strange."

"Well, but—the locked door—with the key on the inside?"

"That's the only perfectly natural thing in the whole article."

"Really! And the bolt?"

"The bolt?"

"Yes, the bolt, also inside the room, a still further protection against entry. Mlle. Stangerson took quite extraordinary precautions. It is clear to me that she feared some one. That was why she took such precautions—even Daddy Jacques' revolver—without telling him of it. No doubt she didn't wish to alarm anybody and, least of all, her father. What she dreaded took place, and she defended herself. There was a struggle, and she used the revolver skillfully enough to wound the assassin in the hand, which explains the impression on the wall and on the door of the large, blood stained hand of the man who was searching for a means of exit from the chamber. But she didn't fire soon enough to avoid the terrible blow on the right temple."

"Then the wound on the temple was not done with the revolver?"

"The paper doesn't say it was, and I don't think it was, because logically it appears to me that the revolver was used by Mlle. Stangerson against the assassin. Now, what weapon did the murderer use? The blow on the temple seems to show that the murderer wished to stun Mlle. Stangerson after he had unsuccessfully tried to strangle her. He must have known that the attic was inhabited by Daddy Jacques and that was one of the reasons, I think, why he must have used a quiet weapon—a life preserver or a hammer."

"All that doesn't explain how the murderer got out of the yellow room," I observed.

"Evidently," replied Rouletabille, rising, "and that is what has to be explained. I am going to the Chateau du Glandier and have come to see whether you will go with me."

"I?"

"Yes, my boy, I want you. The Epoque has definitely intrusted this case to me, and I must clear it up as quickly as possible."

"But in what way can I be of any use to you?"

"M. Robert Darzac is at the Chateau du Glandier."

"That's true. His despair must be boundless."

"I must have a talk with him."

I knew M. Robert Darzac from having been of great service to him in a civil action while I was acting as secretary to Maitre Barbet Delatour. M. Robert Darzac, who was at that time about forty years of age, was a professor of physics at the Sorbonne. He was intimately acquainted with the Stangersons and after an assiduous seven years' courtship of the daughter had been on the point of marrying her. In spite of the fact that she had become, as the phrase goes, "a person of a certain age," she was still remarkably good looking.

While I was dressing I called out to Rouletabille, who was impatiently moving about my sitting room:

"Have you any idea as to the murderer's station in life?"

"Yes," he replied. "I think if he isn't a man in society, he is at least a man belonging to the upper class. But that, again, is only an impression."

"What has led you to form it?"

"Well, the greasy cap, the common handkerchief and the marks of the rough boots on the floor," he replied.

"I understand," I said. "Murderers don't leave traces behind them which tell the truth."

"We shall make something out of you yet, my dear Sainclair," concluded Rouletabille.

(To be continued.)